POLITICAL CULTURE 3 - CHAPTER 6

THE AMERICAN POLITICAL PROCESS

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(**Abstract:** Influences on government: Interest groups, political parties, and the Electoral process itself)

PROF GERALD WRIGHT: The American Nation is wonderful. Most kids think it's the best in the world. Sometimes they get interested in politics. They see politicians and think, "I don't like that one, I don't like that one." It's much like what we all feel about politicians. There's a distinct separation between the current government, the people who are in power, and the underlying belief in the system. There is this sort of buffer when people get unhappy at the system. Instead of trying to change the system, Americans have so far stuck with it and focused their efforts on getting another Administration and hoping things get better.

We have already covered the President, Congress and the Supreme Court, and the doctrine of "separation of powers" which make co-operation among them difficult. In America, the process of getting a good idea and making it a program for the Nation is slow, it's awkward. Very good ideas get undermined, bad ideas hopefully get better, but the American process is much slower than in a Parliamentary System.

Today I want to talk about what we call the "input side:" how citizens go about making demands, letting the United States Government know what they want or what they don't want. I'm going to talk about the 3 principal mechanisms we use to influence the Government: interest groups, political parties and then finally the electoral process itself. Remember, Professor Barbour said the other day that James Madison was really worried about what he thought was a fundamental aspect of human nature; that in a democracy humans would band together and try to influence it for their own narrow purposes. Madison referred negatively to those interests as factions. If you look at the United States today, you will see that we are faction happy.

Interest groups. Take a look at a Washington DC phone book under "American" and "National." You name it, it's there: the American Association of Plumbers, the American Association of Teachers, the American Association of Pipe-fitters, everything. And if they're not "American Association of..." they're "National Association of…" There are thousands of professional and sometimes recreational groups that have organized lobbies that exist full time in Washington DC, trying to influence the government. It's a major part of what we do.

There are several types of interest groups. Some of them are groups of industry, like the National Association of Manufacturers; a great big one, or the US Chamber of Commerce, a conglomerate of a lot of businesses. AFL and CLO, the American Federation of Labor, and Congress of Labor Organisations, which is our biggest collection of Labor Organisations, has a great big presence in Washington. Many groups are very well funded. They have beautiful offices. Many are located along the 'K street corridor' which is a wonderful set of big, high office buildings almost completely populated by well-funded interest groups.

But there are also a lot of small ones, too. Some of them that are just almost mom and pop operations, one person trying to struggle by. I bet there's some small

group of people out there who think that the Petunia Association ought to have representation in Washington. Almost every organization that we can think of does; our University does.

Indiana's interest group would look out and try to make sure that Indiana gets the grant programs, try to make sure that our Congressman pushes some funds to Indiana University in one way or another or help to fund a new Science building, for example.

Another kind of interest group is called the "contract Lobbyist." Often, they include ex-politicians who know how the system works and who are for hire. Interested groups will hire some of these contract lobbyists who have very good connections to get in to see the important people on a committee or a sub-committee or even an administrative agency. An awful lot of American citizens believe that "big money" is just buying its way through; that you go in and bribe your legislator. Tom Delay, for example, the Speaker in the House of Representatives, is getting in ethics trouble because he took a golf trip to Scotland paid for by a Lobbyist.[1] The trip wasn't reported in the right way, and so, of course the Democrats would want to try and crank up the heat on that. But there are rules about how they're supposed to do this stuff and most of them follow them very carefully.

The real impact of lobbying is two fold: First, lobbyists provide information. Legislators want to know what's going to make good policy? How is it going to effect people? That's political information. And so they really are trading more in information than in dollars. Second, money does count, especially when it comes to Elections. We have a whole set of Political Action Committees by which Lobbyists and special interests can funnel money legally to candidates to help get elected. More often, though, contributions go to people who are already elected. Interested groups or individuals make a contribution so they can make a phone to talk to you about something and have the phone call answered. Often people who get the most are the ones who need it the least. The most powerful members of Congress often have huge war chests of money that they absolutely don't need for themselves.

Some people thought that interest groups would counter each other in a great, wonderful balancing mechanism. Well, it doesn't quite work that way. What we find is that some groups have a lot more money than others. Businesses, for example, have a lot more money and a lot more presence in the lobby community in Washington DC than do workers. People who don't have jobs usually don't have anyone to speak for them.

There's a second reason that we find that there's a big bias in the interest group system and I think this is going to be a bias in almost every system. Some kinds of interest groups generate their own lobbies really quickly. If, for example, you are the only manufacturer of something in South Africa and the legislature was going to have to pass a harmful bill, would you take the time to go and try to convince the Legislature that you wouldn't want it done? Sure, you would. But if you are one of 5 000 workers at the same corporation, and the same bill might cost you a Rand an hour in your wages. You think the average worker is going to go a try to lobby the legislator? No, it doesn't happen. It's not that they don't care about money. Workers care about money as much as the owner of the business does. What happens is the problem we call the "free rider" problem. When there's a big group of people who will benefit and their effort would only contribute a little bit, often people will not take action to fight for their cause.

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[1] Delay has since resigned and has been indicted.

Interest groups are there because they can get in. The legislative process that I referred to last time is a very open one. Most citizens can go talk to their legislator and he'll listen and he might even try to change the bill because of that testimony. And if you're a Lobbyist and you have something to say, you could probably get a Committee Chairman to agree to convene hearings on what you have to say.

Political Parties. First off, our system of two parties is a strange beast. New Zealand also has a two party system. England arguably does. They're working with three right now, but for most of its history, it's been a two party system. Our system is over 150 years old. It's been through the Civil War, it's been through two world wars, it's been through recession. It has been through our transition from a very agrarian society to an industrial society, the post Industrial Society and survives into the information age. It's taken us from a relatively isolationist nation to the period of world leadership.

People wonder why they have more parties and the US has only two. Part of the reason for this is history, but part of it is that there are some important elements of Constitutional design behind it. While South Africa and most of the rest of the democracies in the world have a proportional representation system, ours is a district-based system. In a proportional system, if a party gets 20 % of the vote, they get roughly 20 % of the seats. The US doesn't do it that way. In the US, each one of our Members of Congress represents one geographic area.

The US is cut up into 435 Congressional districts.[2] Whoever wants to run for Congress has to run in one of those districts. This means there's only one winner per district. And it doesn't matter how many votes they have. If 10 people run and one ends up with 15 % of the vote, it's a plurality system, they're the winner and they go in, onto Congress. An exception to that is seven of the Southern States have a run-off system. If nobody gets a majority, the top two run against each other.

Now, why does that little difference create a two party system? In simple language, people are pretty smart and they don't want to throw away their votes. If you know there are two big parties that are kind of acceptable, and a third, smaller, party comes up with exactly what you wanted, in a proportional representation system you would no doubt vote for the third party. Perhaps they will form part of a coalition government and your preferences will find a political voice. In a winner take all system, if you vote for that third party, that's a vote lost. Even if you like that party tremendously, that vote's lost.

That was exactly what happened in the 2000 Election when Ralph Nader ran on the far left as a Green party candidate. He only got about 3% of the vote nationwide but in that election it was close enough that Al Gore would have won handily if Nader hadn't gotten into it and diverted votes that would probably have gone to Gore. Nader ran again in 2004, interestingly, but by that time his supporters realized what had happened and he got almost nothing.

Because of the winner take all system we have, voters almost always give up on third parties and go for what some people call the lesser of two evils. On top of that, the states compound the magnitude of the winner take all system by setting up barriers to third parties.[3]

Very unusually in our system – perhaps unique in the world – is the fact that the rules and the administration of national elections are handled by the States. The national government has a couple of general provisions, such as the one requiring

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[2] Geographically defined by State legislatures following censuses held every ten years.

[3] Such as the need to get a large number of voters to sign a petition to include third parties on the State ballots.

votes for the Congress by certain dates and when we have to vote for President, etc. But "how long will the polls be open? What mechanism will they use to register votes?" That's all up to the states.

At the Presidential level, the federal government matches funds for Democratic and Republican candidates. Third party candidates are eligible for that but they don't get the money until after the election, and they don't get anything unless they get at least 5% of the vote. Since it's really hard to get 5% of the vote when everybody is worried about throwing away their vote and helping elect the wrong party, there's just a tremendous bias against third parties.

Americans don't have many of the deep historic cleavages that can separate the country. Most people in America will tell you they are middle class. We don't have much of a conscious class structure. "One big happy family" is sort of the image that the country has of itself. That makes it very hard for extremist parties or third parties to gather many votes as well.

Impact of third parties. On the other hand, there have been a lot of third party movements throughout our history and they've all been very important. Many have had a big impact. Typically when the big parties are complacent and something else is happening in the society - technological change, people becoming unemployed, the value of gold changes - something that is hurting some sector. Voters become unhappy as a result of those changes and if parties don't respond, a third party might arise to take on those interests. The third party comes through, gets a chunk of votes and scares the heck out of the major parties. The major parties in the next election will undoubtedly find a way to take on those interests.

The character of the mainstream Parties. US parties tend to be pretty similar to each other. They agree on the fundamental form of Government, for example. No one would get 10 votes if they said, "This form of Government stinks and we have to have something else." This would clash with that underlying faith in the system. There's overwhelming consensus that the country should be capitalist. There's an overwhelming consensus on the notions of personal responsibility. There's an overwhelming respect for private property.

It's often curious to a lot of American scholars why the poor and unemployed buy into those same principles. It's easy to say why the rich do. But we find that the poor and the unemployed also believe that with just the right break or a little bit of hard work, they could also make it in this system.

The second aspect of the American party system that is pretty different from most others in the world is that it is very highly decentralized. We have national committees like the Republican National Committee and the Democratic National Committee. They've got nice offices in Washington, but they really don't have any power. They cannot tell the "real organizations" on a state level what to do. State party organizations have a kind of a membership relationship.

The Indiana Democratic Party, for example, does what it wants. It can listen to Washington, it can accept their help or not, but it is independent. They pick their own members, they decide on how much they are going to help the candidates and which candidates they are going to help and Washington does not matter. It's also the same at the local level. They are independent of the state party apparatus. My mother just got active with a Democratic organization in Oregon where they haven't had one and they got seven people and started up a local Democratic chapter and they get to do what they want. Nobody can tell them much what to do. So there is this tremendous decentralization and there is almost no authority that is holding the parties together. The thing that does give them a bit of coherence is rough ideological

agreement.

Decentralization promotes the independence of the legislators. Even when the Democratic Party had a big majority following the 1930's, 1940's and 50's, they did not always get their way. Often, legislators defect from the party on issues. They can do this because their relationship is with their constituency, and their local party or organization that put them there; not so much to the national organization. The leadership in congress can punish legislators a little bit; maybe change a committee assignment or not give them as much campaign funds, but it is nothing like you would have in a proportional representation system where you can say you are not going to be on the ballot, you are out when you detect, there is nothing like that kind of control at all.

In recent years the parties have voted together more than in the past, and politics is becoming more polarized, but that is a result of what has happened in the larger party system; not with anything in the organizational structure or powers of the leadership itself.

One of the key roles of the Parties is bring in a set of visions, programs, constituencies that they care about and ideas about how they want government to enact those programs. Those are what I am calling the core issues. The two parties have different constituencies that have different core issues.

The other thing they care about desperately is winning. The desire to win makes Parties willing to compromise on issues because if they loose their out, they get nothing. Parties balance, therefore, their different preferences with their desire to win. When you have an election and one of the parties wins, the second group - if they are stupid - can determine to just try the same thing again. If nothing major changes in society, the same outcome will happen.

Instead of repeating their strategy, though, what they usually do is get some people who did not vote to vote, mobilize new voters, or get some of the people who voted for the winning party to vote for their party. That means the losers have to do something or be something a little bit different in the next election than in the last election. And while they have to reach out to voters, they must also maintain their own constituency. So it is one big undisciplined group working almost like political entrepreneurs trying to find new relations and new groups that they can fold into their coalition so that they can win political office.

<u>Changes in the American Party system.</u> There have been some really remarkable changes in the American Party system in the last 70 years. First there was what we call realignment: a big election that changed the landscape in 1932 when Franklin D Roosevelt came into power following the stock market crash and the great depression. America had never seen anything like that. There was massive unemployment. Politicians did not know what to do and the Republican Party held a traditional line, holding that government should not get involved in the economy. Franklin Roosevelt, a Democrat, on the other hand advocated a whole new set of programs. Some people called this the "American Welfare State," or at least the beginnings of it.

We do not have much of a welfare state compared to Europe. What we do have comes out of Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" programs. Roosevelt started programs like social security and a number of government works programs and became very popular with an awful lot of people. Roosevelt galvanized a whole bunch of people in the elections. Republicans and a fair percent of the public did not like the new role of government in American society that set off a new, what we call cleavage for American politics.

Before the New Deal, we had been regionally split, South against the North, sometimes the West going one way or the other. The Roosevelt Era really changed that cleavage in an important way: it became rich versus poor; it became workers versus business, it became the new immigrant classes that had been collecting in the cities and were now being mobilized by political machines against the old white protestants, who had been controlling the Republican Party and much of the country for a long time. So it really became a political party of "have-nots" - the Democrats - versus the party of the "haves," the Republicans.

That contest played out in several congressional and Presidential elections without an awful lot of change. The Democrats continued to be returned to power, election after election after election without much change. Republicans finally got a Presidential candidate, by running a General - Eisenhower - who became president in 1952. Eisenhower was not much of a political person at all; he did not change the course of public policy very much at all. So America went along with a large Democratic Congress and sometimes a Republican President, until we hit the 1960's and then political change starts to happen, largely because of the organization of Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders, and certainly through the new medium of television which brought all of the protests and marches into living rooms across the country.

Neither national Party was taking on segregation at the time, and the people who were promoting segregation were whites elected by white southerners in the south, so there was very little that could be done. But the Civil Rights Movement forced the issue onto the American agenda, making the political parties take a look. The south was wholly Democratic and had been so since the Civil War. The Democrats, therefore, had a southern conservative wing of the Democratic Party which had a lot of power in Congress, along with a northern liberal wing. The Republicans were still much more focused on business than civil rights or anything else during that period.

The reason we had segregation in the south in the first place was because the tenth amendment reserves all powers "not expressly granted to the national government to the states." The Federal Government had nothing to say about how schools or public facilities were managed; that was a State's domain. It was not until the *Brown versus the Board of Education* decision in the Supreme Court that the court found that separate educational facilities clashed with provisions of the 14th amendment to the constitution.[4] The court gave the Federal Government the legal authority to start desegregation. That issue gave a foothold for making new public policies. The Democratic Party had to either side with its southern conservative wing or embrace civil rights.

The Democrats chose to embrace the civil rights movement. Some Democrats really believed that was the right thing to do, but coincidentally there also were a growing number of African Americans drawn to northern cities to work in manufacturing centers who in several states had a lot of electoral clout. These voters might swing the difference. If the Democrats could get that 10% of the vote, they might capture New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan; big states that would help them win the Presidency. So it was a strategic calculation as well as a I think a principled one.

The Republican Party, meanwhile, knew there were going to be a lot of angry

[4] The 14th amerndment, ratified in 1868 states, among other things that "…no state…may deny any person in its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws."

white southerners who were not going to like this integration business at all. and without wanting to be segregationist, Presidential candidate Barry Goldwater said, "I do not want the Federal Government trampling down on every issue." The only states that went for Barry Goldwater in that election were five Deep South states which had the most severe racial problems in the country.

Following that major transition, the issues have gotten fuzzier. There is still the rich versus poor issue, the business versus labor issue and the unemployed issue, but they are not perfectly matched up and so it gets fuzzy for a lot of voters. Coming from the 1980's into the present, we have the emergence of the "social agenda" or "social issues." Some of that is triggered by another court decision on abortion, *Roe versus Wade*, in which the Supreme Court decided that there was an inherent right to privacy which limits the Federal Government's power to stop women from getting an abortion. Before that it had been up to the states to decide whether a woman could get an abortion, split between the ones that did and the ones that did not. Many people on both sides take that issue very seriously. It is a "hot button issue." The Republicans have taken on a number of these social issues, like should we allow prayer in the schools? Liberals tend to say no, conservatives tend to say yes. The most recent issue that the country is trying to deal with now is sexual orientation. Should you be allowed to discriminate against gays and lesbians? Should they be allowed to marry? That is a hot issue. The Democratic Party tends to be liberal on that and the Republican Party is very clearly conservative on that.

Interestingly, those were issues that when I was growing up nobody ever talked about. Women were supposed to be at home. Gays were people that you make jokes about. The accepted culture has begun to change. Some people embrace it and some people are trying to stop it and inevitably when we get those kinds of issues they work their way into the party system.

<u>The shifting geographical political division.</u> Across the east coast, through an awful lot of the industrial north and the west coast used to be more Republican. As a result of the parties reaching out and grabbing groups and some people leaving them, the political geographies changed a lot. Today, the "red states" (i.e. Republican in orientation) are in the center and south of the US, and they voted for George Bush in the last election. The blue states on the coasts tend to be Democratic and liberal. What was Republican is now Democratic and what was Democratic is now Republican and it has happened slowly enough that an awful lot of people have not even noticed.

<u>American elections.</u> The Parties are partially focused on issues, but they are also about winning elections.

One thing that looks peculiar to a lot of non-Americans, is that we are election "happy." We have elections all the time, even in private small groups. Small kids on a school ground if they are going to have a captain, they will have an election.

The National Elections get the most of the publicity, but we also have all the state elections; 8,000 state legislators, all the councilmen and the mayors and thousands of special district offices like the Water District will have an election for the Water District Supervisor.

So we have all these elections and they are not all at the same time, they are staggered. If you want to be a good voter you will have to vote at least once a year and some years two, three or four times. After a while some people decide they can't go through all that stuff, it is just too much.

Nationally, though, how does a candidate get to be President of the United States? First off they have to win the nomination of one of the major parties.

Winning the nomination in the good old days used to be done at the national political conventions where the party bosses from the different states would get together in back rooms and make deals until they finally decided on a winner. Then they would go out and tell their people on the floor of the convention[5] how to vote and that would be the outcome. But the Progressive Era introduced an effort to break the party monopolies and one of the reforms that they put in was a thing we call the Direct Primary. The idea was really simple; the Parties would have elections to determine their candidates.

Since the state Party organizations are responsible for making rules regarding their elections, they get to decide when to have them. They are a fractious, independent bunch and so they set them at different dates. For a long time New Hampshire wanted to be the first one. Little tiny New Hampshire up in the northeast part of the country where there are about twelve people decided that it would have the first Presidential Primary and the state legislature passed a law that said that if any other state tries to get their Primary ahead of New Hampshire's, New Hampshire immediately changes theirs to go earlier. Often if you watch American films about the Presidency there is always a scene about candidates traipsing through the snow in the winters of New Hampshire.

Iowa, which has an odd primary or "caucus" takes place in a room like this, where you start talking about what candidates you like and then the Party leader says "Okay, everybody who is for Bush go there and stand in that corner." Everybody for Bush's opponent might be over in another spot and they talk some more until finally they split and send delegates to another level of convention.

Really no decisions are made there at all, but the National media counts the outcome of the Iowa caucus as important politically. A week later New Hampshire has its Primary and that is where people actually go and cast a formal ballot. Then they go onto New York, New Jersey, and it used to stretch out all the way until June when the big lollypop had its election: California, which had the most votes.

Usually there are eight or nine candidates that come out of New Hampshire. Last time for the Democrats the front-runner was Howard Dean, who did not do well in Iowa. Kerry looked better than expected. So all of a sudden Kerry became big stuff. About a week after that, Dean is out the race and pretty soon those Primaries dwindle them down until there is nobody left standing except one candidate. Way before California ever would have gotten to vote, everybody knows who the nominee is going to be.

Iowa and New Hampshire get a lot of attention and promises from hopeful politicians. Other states have tried to capture some of this by moving their Primaries up and up and up. It used to be that there was a long run and there were enough Primaries that the people got to know the candidates - even the "dark horses" - somebody who we do not know, might to prove to be the winner instead of just somebody who is really well-known, well healed and already established. But when they moved all those Primaries up there is hardly anytime for a candidate that we do not know to blossom.

The Republican nominee for the last two elections was George Bush, a brilliant nominee for the Republicans to pick because everyone knew him, because his dad had been President and in fact there are some polls that show that for the first several months they thought his dad was running again.

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[5] That is, the political conventions held each four years where the parties select their candidates for President.

There is concern that the way the Primaries are running now narrows the field too much; that it does not really give us an opportunity to bring in new blood and new ideas. 1992 is a good example. Most of us had never heard of Bill Clinton and it took a while, but all of a sudden, this guy from Arkansas starts winning and the people are paying attention. After a few Primaries, Democrats liked him pretty well. But that was before the Primaries became compressed as they are now.

Through the primaries, each party ends up nominating a candidate and we move forward to the nominating conventions which are held in the summer - usually July & August. In 2004, the Republican convention stretches all the way into September so that it was very close to September 11th trying to get some of the aura of the American sympathy with the politicians.

What happens at the nomination conventions is now less and less of interest to Americans because we already know who the nominee is going to be. The mystery is who the Vice President might be, because Presidents get to pick their own Vice President from the nominees and they have to be ratified by the convention but in the last couple of elections the candidates have told the public who their Vice President nominees are going to be beforehand.

The reason for this disclosure is actually quite interesting. In 1972 George McGovern ran on anti-Vietnam war plank, got the nomination and made the nominee Tom Eagleton, who was then the Senator from Missouri. Eagleton accepted and then about three days later some enterprising reporter finds out that Eagleton had a history of mental disease; that he had had electric shock treatment. McGovern had to chuck him. He probably never had a chance anyway, but he sure didn't after that. So now the Presidents very carefully vet the background of the Vice Presidents so they do not have all kinds of embarrassing stuff come out.

After Labor Day, which is round September 1st, the official campaign, the general election campaign, kicks off. That is when a particular weirdness called the Electoral College kicks in. In effect, while the Founding Fathers wanted consent of the governed, they did not really want to be governed by the people and they sure did not want these rabble rousers who had caused so much trouble under the articles of the confederation picking the President. The Founders then came up with the indirect election through wise men or electors. The Electoral College process would be smart enough to put in a man of virtue and wisdom.

Voting rights in the Electoral College are distributed in a kind of odd way. Each state gets the number of electoral votes equal to the number of people they have in congress. So every state gets two, because each state has two Senators. Little tiny Alaska gets two and California, which is about 200 times its size or more, gets two. Then you additional electors based on the number of the state's Representatives in Congress. Those are in proportion to the population, with each state receiving at least one (in addition to the two "Senator" Electors) extra elector.

When the elections are held, most states have a winner take all system, so that if you can win in California even by 1% of the popular vote, you get all 57 electoral votes. Your opponent, who spent millions of dollars getting 49%, gets no electoral votes. The result is really not one big election, but 50 small ones, where candidates try to figure out who is going to win in each of the states and seek to maximize their electoral vote. Where they are going to spend their money, their campaign advertising, where they are going to do their political polling, where they are going to send their movie star endorsements, all of that is dictated by the Electoral College.

Obviously, if you can win in a big state, you get a whole lot of electoral votes more than when you win in a small state, so it makes sense to try to win the big states.

In a lot of states, we know which party is most likely going to win. Right now I can tell you in the next Presidential Election how Indiana is going to go: Indiana will go Republican. That is a very safe bet because we have gone Republican in every election.

In addition to the Electoral vote, there is also what we call the popular vote. What happens when a candidate wins the popular and loses the electoral vote? It happened three times in American history and every time it happens people object vehemently. Commissions are formed to see what can be done, and they fade away. The Electoral College and popular votes usually coincide, and the system has one advantage: it makes the winner look like they won by a lot more than they really did. For example, in 1992 Bill Clinton only got 43% of the popular vote because we had a third party candidate that year, Ross Perot, who got 18% of the vote. But Clinton ended up with 69% of the Electoral College. In 1992, it looked like Bill Clinton was the clear winner.

Money is becoming a bigger and bigger part of the process. The candidates together last time spent $78,000,000 on the Presidential Elections. There is also an awful lot of talk in the United States about "Red and Blue America." "Red America" is conservative, Republican, tending to be church goers, tending to be against gun control, tending to be suspicious about welfare, they want less government, they oppose gay marriage.

Now it may look like the Republicans overwhelmingly dominate the Democrats, but note that among the blue states are most of the big states. California has the largest population in the country, Michigan is huge, Illinois, Pennsylvania, New York are all really big states and one of the ones that is very contested typically is Florida, which can go either way. Texas used to be Democratic, but will be Republican I think for the foreseeable future.

South African reflection by Prof. Antony Melck, Univ. of Pretoria,

PROF MELCK: First, I must tell you that I'm an economist by training and not a political scientist, so my perspective may have a slight bias from that angle. I found Prof. Wright's presentation fascinating, stimulating, intriguing to see the way in which the electoral system works, the way that American citizens are given a say in the process. Clearly, there are many different ways that ordinary citizens have an input. The emphasis is on the election process, but Prof. Wright also told about how lobbying functions, how associations function within the American system and the influence they exercize over the process.

I was also interested in the part about the U.S. electoral process. The intricacies of that, the independence of the state in determining their own functioning's and how they proceed, the systems that they put in place, but these all ad up through the process of primaries etc, to the electoral college and to there the election of a president. Our system is very different, but it does have some similarities. Let me dwell on how and why I think our system is different.

If one starts by examining the differences, though, a question comes immediately to mind: Clearly the United States is the leading Nation in the world; it's a winning system, it functions extremely well for the American people. Why then should we be different? If it works well in the United States, why do we not copy it here? Certainly if one looks at those questions from an economist's point of view, the issue is largely around the provision of public goods and services and how one should organise oneself to provide public goods and services. If it makes sense to group

people so that their preferences have a measure of uniformity within a particular constituency - and because South Africa is such a diverse Nation - one would expect that that logic would lead again to a system similar to that in the US. But it's not as I have pointed out.

I would go back for a moment to the issues around how citizens form their thoughts and preferences and start with the similarities. In terms of political influence, there are similar processes available in South Africa. There are organisations that do lobbying to try to influence policy. Perhaps not in exactly the same way, but for example the universities. The higher education institutions in South Africa have an association called "higher education South Africa" similar to those that exist in Washington. That association tries to influence education policy by lobbying the various bodies; particularly the Departments of State dealing with education for example, but also through the Parliamentary process lobbying the members of portfolio committees. They do this by getting interviews with Ministers and people of influence. Our government solicits the views of its citizens by publishing draft policies and explicitly asking for comments. One of my main professional tasks is in fact responding on behalf of the University of Pretoria to government initiatives in that way.

Usually in written format, but in other ways of making contact with important influential people in the government departments and going to the portfolio committees, I have addressed the portfolio committees of finance and of education in a similar way described for the US system. Our system is perhaps not as broadly developed as what we've heard, but certainly a similar kind of process developing.

If I were to turn however to the electoral process, that is somewhat different. Our system is largely a proportional system, but it does also culminate in an Electoral College proportional in terms of the members elected for the National Assembly, but the National Assembly then becomes as it were an Electoral College which elects the president. The Council of Provinces, the second house, is very different, but in some conceptual ways also similar because there the "Electoral College" is in a sense the Provincial legislatures and the Provincial legislatures then elect the representatives of the Province that go to the Parliament and the National Council of Provinces. So to summarize this bit there are similarities, but in many other ways differences.

And I want to come back to my initial question now: Why these differences? If the USA is the winning Nation, should it not be the model that we should be following? Section 1 of the South African constitution begins with the words, the Republic of South Africa is one sovereign democratic State with the emphasis on the one sovereign democratic stand. Why this emphasis on a unitary state in contrast then to what we see in the USA? Well, again with my economist hat on, it's because there's a tension between centralization and decentralization.

I'm not going to talk about federalism, because the South African system prefers to be seen as a unitary state, but it is – it has large elements of decentralisation in it which of course are similar to a federal dispensation. But there's a trade off between centralisation and decentralization. Decentralization means greater autonomy, but less sharing of resources and centralization means a lack of independence but a greater sharing of resources. And to me this is one of the crucial issues, the issue of resources, but that's not the only reason. I'm going to return to the issue of resources in a few moments.

The second major issue after centralization/decentralization or the federal/unitary issue is the question about history. We are all aware of the unfortunate history that South Africa has had with apartheid. But in an odd way,

apartheid was a decentralized kind of federal system.

In the apartheid process, the independent so-called states in South Africa, the homelands, were in a sense a federalist structure although they were not called that. But the effect of this - lets call it perverse decentralization - was that the resources were not shared. That's why I'm placing the emphasis on the resources. People were partitioned, placed in separate states as it were, but the resources were kept largely separate also. Now, there were some sharing mechanisms that we didn't go into, but in principal I think that holds to a large degree. So our history and the consequences of that largely militate against going the route, which we have seen in the leading nation.

Let me come back then to the issue of the resources, because I think this is such a dominating - and a dominant - reason for why our system differs. If the basic constitutional point of departure is different, the whole electoral system reflects a difference too. In South Africa, the provinces can only raise about 5% of the funds which they need to fulfill their functions. 95%, then, comes from central government from taxes raised nationally. 5% comes from their own revenue sources, mainly licenses and fees, hospital fees etc. The lion's share of revenues comes from the Gauteng area and a few urban centers.

Clearly, if we were to go the decentralised route, then the resources would be mainly concentrated in Gauteng area and a lot of the provinces would have very few resources. So the solution which our constitution writers came up with was largely to centralize the revenue and of course, he who has the resources has the power and that lead to a lot of centralization politically also.

But the centralization of the resources and then the revenue sharing from the center to the provinces and to a degree to local government also is simply by a revenue sharing mechanism. The constitution says that "each province is entitled to an equitable share of the national revenue and the national revenue."

There is an independent commission – a constitutional commission which divides those resources or at least advises Parliament on how those resources should be divided to the different provinces and this is done through a revenue sharing mechanism formula – it's a formula basis which allocates to each province the revenues that they are going to be getting. They can top up the revenues and they do so on average with about 5%, but basically they receive their funds from central government. Now, with that dispensation obviously the South African system is very different.

So just to summarize the reasons for the differences form the "winning model," I would point to those two main things: that given our history, our constitution writers went basically for a unitary state, and a highly centralized state. Since such a state cannot deal with the issues of public goods as effectively as a decentralized one, very strong decentralized elements were built into the unitary state which gives us the flavor that we have. So you have to see it within the context of our own history.

Secondly, within the context of our economic situation where we have huge disparities of wealth not only between people, between races, between classes, but also between provinces geographically, those disparities of wealth made it important not to go the completely decentralised route, but to have a revenue sharing mechanism. Those two reasons essentially determine that the whole process, the whole electoral process, is very different - to my way of thinking.

Question and answer session

QUESTION: Professor Wright, looking at Mugabe's attempt to destroy civil society and especially its NGOs, how are American NGOs governed? Especially in terms of them coming into existence and the parameters of their activities.

Second, are there any interest groups in America that interrogate seriously the American dream, question the American dream?

Third, is there any interest group in America that celebrated September 11th? Would you accept in America an interest group that is funded or controlled by a terrorist organisation suspected or confirmed and what would be the implications on democracy as an institution?

PROF WRIGHT: If I understood the question, you asked if there are any American interest groups that lobby against the American dream? Probably. There are certainly some groups that lobby against my American dream, but those are ones I disagree with. I have a clear vision as every other citizen does about what my country ought to be. But we don't agree on a clear definition or what that would be.

In terms of who is allowed to gather and make groups, the reason that we allow all these lobbies is the constitution guarantees citizens what they call the "right to redress to grievances." So if you have a complaint, the constitution guarantees you the right to complain, to tell government what you would want to have. Under that provision, you really can't set up laws that stop interest groups that we don't like. Except groups that would be seen as a threat to the state. Perhaps Christine would like to say a word about where we draw the line on the groups that would advocate terrorism?

PROF BARBOUR: We make a distinction between speech and action and where action kicks in, you can be much more regulated. However, I think the terrorist stuff is going to fall under the Patriot Act that was just passed post 9/11. I don't know the exact details of the Act, but under it, behavior is much more closely monitored and if you were specifically involved in funding a terrorist organization or a member of a terrorist organization whose avowed purpose is terrorism toward the United States, you would not be invited into the free flow of interest group politics in America. But that's probably the one real place where you would be excluded. This is a very broad freedom – it's not just the right to redress grievances, but this first amendment guarantees your right to assemble.

And the right to assemble is the right to gather with other like-minded people and to push your political agenda. So it's pretty broad, pretty tolerant in that respect. People may not like you, but you can do it. I mean the Klu Klux Klan[6] is allowed to exist in the United States. Neo Nazi groups are allowed to exist and to march.

There was a famous Supreme Court case where a Neo Nazi group wanted to march in a Jewish neighbourhood in Chicago and they claimed it was their right to freedom of speech. Survivors of the holocaust who live in that neighborhood and other people as well who found the ideas offensive said, "this is outrageous, you can't allow this." The case went all the way to the Supreme Court, which held for the Neo Nazis' right to march, stating "tolerance of ideas means tolerance of the ideas we don't like." So, we have a pretty high threshold when it comes to tolerating groups except in the terrorism department.

PROF WRIGHT: The Patriot Act in a sense seems to draw in or make tighter

[6] A racist group prominent in the south following the Civil War and during the 1920's.

some of the freedoms that we've always assumed we had. But we don't even know how it's going to unfold because it's new. The standard is now that if somebody wanted to advocate their cause, or say "the United States is a lousy imperialist" and all that stuff, there would be no question you could do that. On the other hand, if you wanted to insight people to action - into say, "let's set up a meeting on how to make a bomb to blow up in the state Capital" at that point, you'd be arrested.

QUESTION: If you live in Indiana and if say for example you were a Democrat and the state votes consistently Republican in the Electoral College, what then is the point of voting?

PROF WRIGHT: That's a good question that goes back to the free rider problem we talked about earlier. If you look at the number of voters in almost any country, the likelihood that your vote is really going to count at the end of the day is quickly approaching absolute zero. The truth is that whoever is going to be elected next time in South Africa and the US is going to be elected whether you and I vote or not.

The answer is, we vote for some other reason than we think that we are going to be the tiebreaker. We feel better by having backed somebody we like, for having done our citizen's duty or to let off steam, like when we're mad at somebody and I go out and vote against him and I feel better. A lot of it is just sort of expression, and it is very important for citizens to do that. For another thing, voting makes the outcome - even though you have not really had anything to say about it - more acceptable.

So being able to participate in the process even though you don't change it, adds legitimacy to it and that's very important in this democratic society. It's how we accept the outcome at the end of the day.

QUESTION: Professor Wright, you mentioned the central role of campaigning for elections and to my mind that means that candidates have got to be able to have charisma to pull the crowds in and to make their points to be able to impress the media etc, etc. So, would you please comment on the role of technocrats in the political sphere, i.e. people that have been educated to become politicians who may not have the charismatic approach and so they sort have done policy studies, political science etc, versus the role of populist people who do not really have a fundamental political idea that works, but they're able to pull in the crowds and to have a charismatic approach to what politics is.

PROF WRIGHT: What I tell my students is that by the time somebody can get through that incredibly complicated process of being scrutinized by the parties and the media - I mean, nobody looks at your life the way that these Presidential candidates get inspected; everything they've done, everything they've written - the opposition looks for every kind of mistake they've ever made, their backgrounds; I mean they really vetted thoroughly, so that we hope at the end of the day if a candidate is a demagogue then we would found it out.

In the sense of getting somebody that's really not competent to be President, the argument is: you may not always agree with him, but then the President has actually made it; he's gone through a lot of tests by the time that he gets there. It wasn't just a couple of people in a closed room who decided "this guy is going to be our leader, because we can agree on him."

You also asked about the idea of charisma and the candidates who need to bring in people. Students often ask me the same question: there's so much media in it, isn't it just the attractive candidate that's going to win? If you look at the history of our candidates, the answer is "no." Americans - and I think other places too - don't want movie stars for Presidents. Look at the 1960 election when John Kennedy was

young and vibrant and he beat Richard Nixon who was not young and vibrant. And some people argue that proves that good looks work. In fact, people that watched the debate on television said Kennedy won, while people who listened on radio thought that Nixon did. So people said "ah television is going to mess everything up."

But on the other hand if you look at the 1964 election, if anybody looked Presidential, it Barry Goldwater. He had wavy nice hair, nice accent, and sort of made the whole country feel good, he was a good looking guy. But he was trounced by Lyndon Johnson, a great big, gawky Texan with an oversized nose. Nobody thought that Lyndon Johnson was attractive, but he was making the policies that we wanted.

Bush/Kerry? I don't know who's more attractive. I mean I don't think either one of them is too hot, but, I think people really aren't looking for movie stars; they're looking for people they like, they're looking for people who have a sense of empathy. That was one of the things that Ronald Reagan really scored well on. The Democrats were saying, "well he's not to quick, he doesn't have a lot of experience in government," but people said, "well he's big, straight and he's warm and I think he's telling the truth" and they felt very good about him and Americans still do, a lot of them.

So there's some element of the personal connection that is very important in the Presidential election, but there's also a huge element of assessment of the competence of the candidate.

Now, there probably are some people who have really good ideas who want to be President. Those people are going to feed their ideas into the party and to the party apparatus which would be my argument that those ideas will get implemented. Bush was very frank about this during the campaign, saying "I surround myself with very good people." And so he was very good following policy advice. Ideas have a way of "sifting up."

But it's also true that people respond to the person and that somebody could have all the knowledge in the world and if they didn't come across well in public, they probably wouldn't get elected.

QUESTION: Can you provide a brief overview of the open relationship between business and political parties? In the South African context, political parties are not required to disclose their sources of funding during election campaigns.

PROF WRIGHT: There is, as you say, an awful lot of money that flows to both parties from business groups, both in Congressional elections as well as in the national election campaigns. One of the things we argue about and are concerned about a lot in America is the role of money in elections.

The Supreme Court has held that giving money or spending your own money is a form of speech.[7] In the last election, there was a new loophole found in which an organisation or "group" can accept large amounts of money to advocate a cause. These groups just can't say "vote for George Bush or vote for John Kerry," but they can say anything they want about their clause. Of course, these groups tend to support the candidates' causes. And so it really is a loophole – and these groups don't have to report where that money comes from.

PROF BARBOUR: On the role of technocrats and politicians (previous question), think tanks are also heavily engaged in developing policies. After the Goldwater loss in 64, the Republican Party really found itself unable to articulate

[7] Congress has, however, passed a series of laws regulating the amounts that individuals and corporations are allowed to contribute. These caps are currently $1,000 and $5,000 per entity per campaign. Primary elections and elections are treated as separate elections under the law.

what it stood for. One of the things they did was to form think tanks where very smart people sat down and sort of crafted a comeback approach.

The Democrats are now scratching their heads. They feel like the Republicans after 1964. They don't have a sense of purpose, they don't have a sense of unity and so they also are starting to consider how they should use think tanks.
Academics like us have political views, but we're not working, we're not using our political knowledge for a party, because no party has asked, but we do pride ourselves by not pushing a particular agenda with our research. Think tanks may have ideological purposes and they certainly are starting to have some partisan purpose.

QUESTION: How come there is racism in America and does the set-up of the political structure of the United State affect the advancement of black people into the Presidency of the United States?

PROF WRIGHT: The answer to the first question goes back to American basic principals that were just logically incompatible with slavery and racism. The Founders simply skirted the issue because the Southern States would not have joined the country had slavery been dealt with. The Founders decided they were just going to put that issue off. They did so until the Civil War, and as a consequence we fought the bloodiest war we ever have fought to settle the issue.

Most Americans today don't see any place for racism and they don't believe that people should be treated unequally. But for Americans equality means equality of opportunity. That means the state is not allowed to treat black people and white people differently. This took going through the 1960's with the civil rights. At that point most Americans felt they were done with racism. All the laws that treated the blacks differently were struck off the books.

The problem is we have a 200-year legacy in which people of color were held back. Blacks don't have the resources in all sorts of ways to compete effectively in the economy and have not caught up yet and we haven't figured out how we are going to do it. Part of the problem is related to inner cities where many blacks live and where there are just no jobs now.

I don't know if it's racism as much as selfishness. What you'll find is in larger cities, whites - who often live in the suburbs - are saying, "I don't want to be taxed to support people in the inner cities. I need the money for my schools and my kids." I think the attitude would probably be the same if there were really poor kids in the inner city that were white.

To some extent, people think of themselves, their families first and want services for themselves and their families and their friends first. Some people in America argue that is just a polite form of racism. Others say that's part of the American creed of individualism and that people should be self-reliant and that government should treat everybody equally.

As per your question about having a black President. I think we could easily have a black President. What you see is a bifurcation in white Americans' thoughts about race. Really successful blacks like Michael Jordan and Bill Cosby who are "funny and rich and have real class like us" are quite accepted. The clearest case was in the 2000 election for President where polls showed that Colin Powell could have won handily over every Democrat. The Republicans said "he's not dependably conservative enough" - it wasn't his race.

Powell would have won easily and would have been the first black President. Partly, this is because he was seen as a successful General, and partly because he wasn't a black leader; he wasn't seen as merely a spokesman for the black community. Whether or not somebody like Jessie Jackson could be elected President,

that’s a much tougher question.